



0. THE UNBROKEN CODE - Story Preface
1. A PACIFIC EMPIRE
2. DANGEROUS OPPONENTS
3. DEATH IN CHINA
4. ATROCITIES IN CHINA
5. ABOUT IWO JIMA
6. THE ARMADA ARRIVES
7. JAPAN'S IWO JIMA DEFENSES
8. LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA
9. JUST A MOP-UP?
10. D-DAY: 19 FEBRUARY 1945
- 11. THE UNBROKEN CODE**
12. INCHING TOWARD SURIBACHI
13. A FLAG-RAISING ON SURIBACHI
14. THE REPLACEMENT FLAG RAISERS
15. THE FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPH
16. FLAG RAISERS DIE IN BATTLE
17. KURIBAYASHI'S LAST LETTERS
18. SECURING IWO JIMA
19. IWO JIMA MEDALS OF HONOR
20. SURVIVORS RAISE CASH via WAR BONDS
21. WHY IWO JIMA WAS CAPTURED
22. FIRE BOMBS OVER TOKYO
23. RESULTS of WAR
24. THE REST OF THEIR LIVES
25. EPILOGUE - EARTHQUAKE in JAPAN
26. Awesome Guide to 21st Century Research

Navajo Code Talkers, an indispensable part of the Pacific war theater. USMC Photo.

Major Howard Conner, signal officer of the Fifth Marine Division at Iwo Jima, acknowledged the contribution of Navajo code talkers during the battle:

Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima. During the first 48 hours, while we were landing and consolidating our shore positions, I had six Navajo radio networks operating around the clock. In that period alone, they sent and received over 800 messages without an error.

Who were these code talkers? What was their code? Who had developed it?

In February of 1942, Philip Johnston, a civilian engineer and World War I veteran, had an idea. What if America's military forces were to use the Navajo language as the basis of a secret code? Johnston knew something about that language. The son of Protestant missionaries to the Navajo people, he had spent most of his life on, or near, the reservation. He was one of about thirty non-Navajos who could speak the unwritten, extremely difficult language.

Johnston believed Navajo speakers could develop a code they could teach to other “code talkers” who would then be sent wherever they were needed. If Philip Johnston’s idea could be implemented quickly, a code could be in place before the end of 1942.

Because Navajo was an unwritten language (follow the link to hear it spoken), sending messages would be simple once everything was in place. Code talkers would have to memorize the code and use it when communicating with each other. They would have neither cumbersome encryption machines nor logs that could be stolen by the enemy. They would only have themselves, as a “walking code,” and their radio or telephone equipment.

The concept was ingenious but difficult to initially implement. Each code talker would have to commit the entire code to memory (once it was created) and would have to know it as well as he knew his own name. Only such a thorough understanding of the code would allow a Navajo to instantly translate military communications in difficult combat conditions.

Living in San Diego at the time, Johnston proposed his idea to Lt. Colonel James E. Jones who was stationed seven miles north at Camp Elliott. Their conversation is recorded in The Navajo Code Talkers, originally published in 1973 by Doris A. Paul.

Colonel, what would you think of a device that would assure you of complete secrecy when you send or receive messages on the battlefield?

Incredulous, Jones responded:

In all the history of warfare, that has never been done. No code, no cipher is completely secure from enemy interception. We change our codes frequently for this reason. (Code Talkers, page 8)

Persuaded to at least consider a demonstration, Jones and other officers were amazed two weeks later when Navajo civilians instantly translated six commonly used military messages. By April of 1942, Marine recruiters had selected twenty-nine Navajos who developed the code which was used (and never broken) throughout the Pacific campaign - including at Iwo Jima.

Without the Navajo code talkers, Marines would have been in even worse trouble as they inched their way toward Mt. Suribachi.

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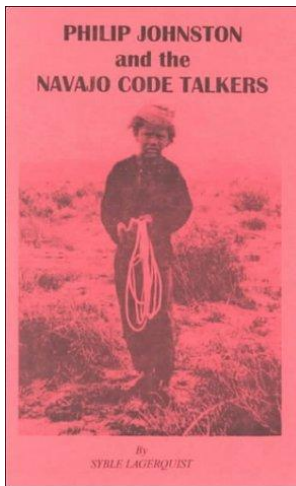
Media Stream



Navajo Radio Networks Operating 24-7

U.S. Marine Corps Sketch by John Fabian, maintained by the U.S. National Archives.

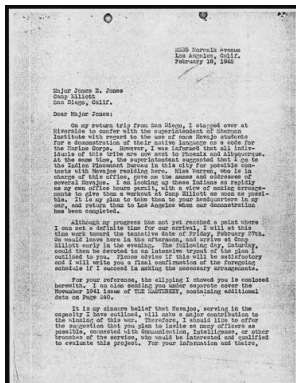
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Philip Johnston and Navajo Code Talkers

Image online, courtesy [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) website.

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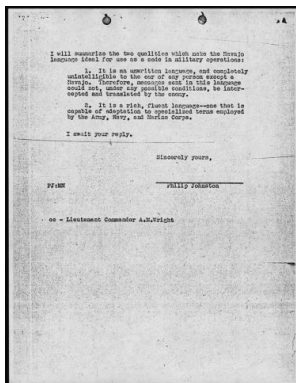
Letter from Johnston Describing Navajo Communications

Image of Philip Johnston's proposal, cover page, suggesting the Navajo language be used as a WWII code. Online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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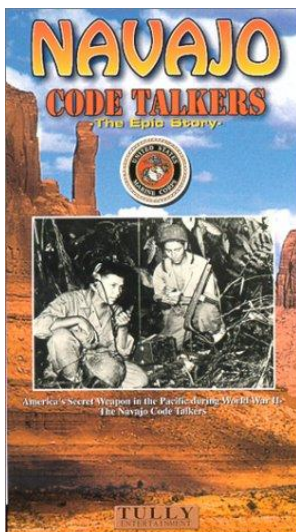


Letter from Johnston Describing Navajo Code

Image of Philip Johnston's proposal, cover page, suggesting the Navajo language be used as a WWII code. Online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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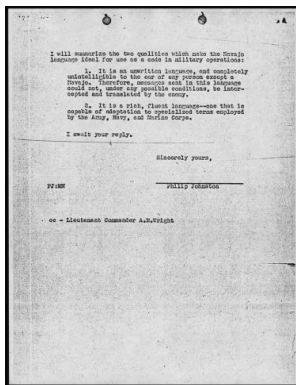
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Video Detailing the Navajo Code

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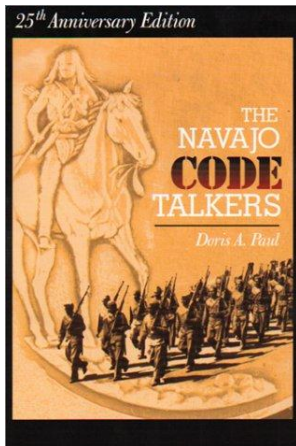


Letter from Johnston Detailing Navajo Code

Image of Philip Johnston's proposal, cover page, suggesting the Navajo language be used as a WWII code. Online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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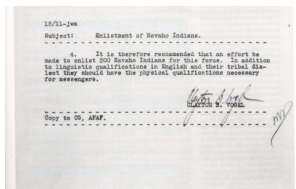
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The Navajo Code Talkers, a Book by Doris Paul

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.

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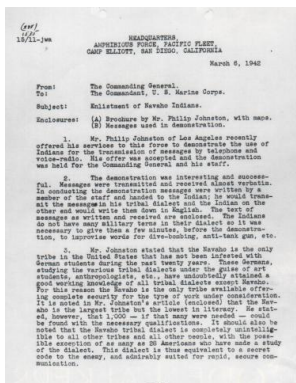
Letter from Headquarters Authorizing Use of Navajo Communication

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Memo to Marine Corps from Commanding General Regarding Navajo

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